

Willemijn Heeren

Perceptual Development of Phoneme Contrasts in Adults and Children

This thesis reports on a series of experiments on the acquisition of speech perception. The two questions central to this research are: (i) how do listeners learn to distinguish phoneme contrasts, and (ii) do children differ from adults in the way they acquire phoneme contrasts?

A listener's perception is tuned to the speech sounds present in his or her native language. This means that listeners are very good at perceiving the small, but crucial difference between two acoustically similar speech sounds that differ linguistically. However, they have difficulty perceiving an equally small acoustic difference between two speech sounds that do not differ linguistically, i.e. two speech sounds taken from the same phoneme category. The first goal of this investigation is to study *how* the perception of speech sound contrasts develops to yield such efficient processing. In addition, the question is raised whether perception in child learners develops in the same way as in adult learners. As children differ from adults in the way they perceive their first language phoneme contrasts, the learning of new contrasts may also show differences between these groups of listeners.

The results show that school-aged children and adults learn phoneme contrasts in similar ways. Furthermore, it is shown that perceptual development of second language phoneme contrasts is a long-lasting process, but also that perceptual sensitivity to particular acoustic differences can become native-like.

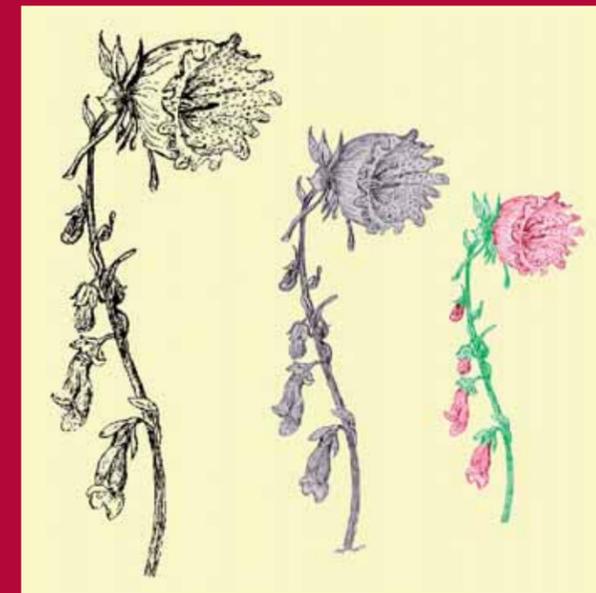
Perceptual Development of Phoneme Contrasts in Adults and Children is of interest to researchers working in the fields of phonetics, psycholinguistics, phonology and language acquisition.

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ISBN-10: 90-78328-01-0
ISBN-13: 978-90-78328-01-8

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